

DUALISM IN FICTION.

A STORY OF THE ENGLISH BARBARIAN.

THE SECOND SON. By M. O. W. OLIPHANT and T. B. ALDRICH. Two vols. \$2.50. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

Joint authorship in this instance has produced a strong, well-composed novel. It is principally a study of that English class which Mr. Matthew Arnold called the Barbarians, and the qualities which justify that title have seldom been more strikingly illustrated than in "The Second Son." Such people as Mr. Mifflin and his three sons are so largely the product of institutions that their dominant characteristics might be sought vainly in any other country than England. It is indeed the law of primogeniture which furnishes the leading motive here, but it is none the less the question of succession; and the way in which the destinies of a family may be swayed and moulded by the stupidity, passion or caprice of a tyrannical and unsympathetic father affords opportunity for strong and moving situations. The second son, Edmund, while very much the best man of his family, is after all rather a passive than an active hero. He shows himself capable of a fine devotion and a generous renunciation, but one cannot but feel that in refusing to supplant his elder brother when he knew that failing him, the succession would pass to Stephen, the black sheep of the family, he manifested an unsatisfactory shortsightedness.

Roger, the natural heir, is subtly conceived. His passion for Lily Ford is romantic with the romance which perhaps is only possible to a man of mature years, when he has been brought up in leading strings and without worldly experience. Roger's innocence is curiously exhibited in the practical ignorance of the effect of his disinheritance upon his future. It does not seem to him that the total deprivation of fortune ought to make the least difference in his plans, in the feelings of the girl he loves. A more experienced person, one who knew what poverty was and realized the enormous difficulty, for a young man bred in luxury, of making a living and a home for any woman, would have been held back by the reflection that he was imperilling the happiness, certainly the comfort, of the object of his passion. Roger does not think of this at all, but pursues his way with unabated ardor and confidence. There is, however, one point in his course which seems to us to strain probability. When his declaration to Lily had only elicited expressions of fright and confusion from her; when she hastened to get away from him; when, the next day, he found that she still shunned him; surely it was not altogether natural for him to proceed to London in the unshaken conviction that she would consent to be his wife.

From this point the story marches forward with something of the steadiness and pitilessness of a Greek tragedy. All the things which ought to fail of fruition. All the things which ought not to be happy. The fate of poor Roger is in itself not wholly a calamity. His day-dream was shattered though he passed away without knowing it. But the substitution of the brutal egotist Stephen for the self-sacrificing, tender-concerned Edmund, and the catastrophe which results in establishing the wrong done in his moment of passion by the despotic head of the family, are grim reproductions of those perplexing events in real life which make men doubt the presence of any overwhelming power. Nothing can be more true to human vicissitudes. The grim response to the busy, present world, full of his plans for the future—"Thou fool! This night shall thy soul be required of thee!"—is repeated day by day in a thousand forms. "With the house is finished, Death enters." The Turkish proverb puts it; and the masters of fiction have ever comprehended their art too well to palliate the actual order of things merely for the sake of sparing their readers an uncomfortable feeling. The cynic Stephen crows his insatiable and unreasonable father and has his own way. The loyal, respectful Edmund is punished for his virtues. Even when he refuses to take Roger's place, through pure brotherly love and integrity, his renunciation works only evil, for it puts in power a heartless, selfish, vicious scamp, and disables the honorable man from employing a great property beneficially.

While the authors have described a kind of man whose nature it is to be so self-contained and reserved among themselves that their habit of mind might easily be mistaken for callousness, and their external brusqueness for mere boorishness, by those who did not know them, they are here shown as capable of feeling and manifesting strong passion, when occasion arises. The realism of Mrs. Oliphant and Mr. Aldrich does not go the length of excluding either romance or emotion. The world as they see it is as full of passion as it ever was and as full also of picturesqueness and beauty. Custom, convention, class traditions, may and do encrust the central fires with so solid an accretion that the careless observer may conclude the volcano to be extinct; but more penetrating observation detects the latent energy, and rightly infers that when the sufficing impulsion is given the suspended activities will be resumed.

It must not be supposed from what we have said that "The Second Son" is a solemn story. It is difficult to follow a faithful study of real life without feeling anew the perplexity of the insoluble problems which confront us every day, but that does not detract from the enjoyment of the humor which is so intimately blended with sadness in the actual, and which the true artist will take care not to exclude from his picture. There is in this book plenty of cheerful matter. The surprising evolution of little Nina, the neglected, motherless girl of the Mifflin family, into a confirmed and eager gossip, under the training of the servants' hall, is a case in point. Another capital characterization is that of Mrs. Travers. Pax also has her amusing side, and the old lawyer, Gavelkind, is a decidedly genial person, with gavel-like qualities in the line of light comedy.

Elizabeth Travers is perhaps hardly a finished personation, but fresh, bright, simple and lovable, so far as we are permitted to know her. Lily was a difficult study in the very nature of things, but a successful one. Nothing better could have resulted from her bringing up, and but for a solid foundation of inherited pride and purity, something immeasurably worse must have been evolved. Her escape from Stephen is possibly too fortunate a chance to be altogether natural, but in fiction there must be permitted a certain license, and, moreover, since everything does happen, even though some things happen often others, the end of Lily's adventure may be defended as artistic.

It is a proof of the power and skill of the story that the reader in closing it regards the turn of events which leaves Stephen Mifflin prosperous, impudent and with a fair wind to fill his sails. That is how we all feel when we see a bad man succeeding in life, and a novel which calls into action one of the healthiest and most saving instincts possessed by civilized man deserves to be considered a good one, in more senses than one.

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